

Glasses  
by P. J. Rondinone

When I get up in the morning, I just lay in bed, like an old log, listening to my mom's sweet voice, singing in the kitchen like she swallowed a whole pack of angels—wings, trumpets, and all. And I like her face, all glowing, like she has a halo, all fuzzy and warm. Just like my bedroom curtains. They're all fuzzy, too, and they got a warm light shining through, showing off a pretty design, like a million ladybugs. Lord knows, everything in my room seems to have this soft glow. My walls are all yellowy and my ceiling is a mess of different colors, all for me, my private rainbow.

Outside my window, I thank God the courtyard is the prettiest in the whole world, even if the TV is always saying that the South Bronx is some kind of mess. I mean, I heard it's spozed to be so bad, they sent for the President of the United States to look for his-big-self. But he saw it wasn't as bad as they said. 'Cause he ain't never been back here. Or heard form. And that's word with me.

I got the prettiest garden right under my window. It has hedges and bushes and green grass and the whole thing sparkles in the sun, like someone sprinkled diamonds all over it. And then there is old Mr. Hedges. He sits all day long in a big-butt chair and you can see that he must be the richest man in the world because all kinds of gold dust spills out from under his behind, gathering at his feet. Like he's on a king's throne!

And Hedges has one of those halo faces, like Mom, all fuzzy and soft. It's like God blessed everything and everybody with a special glow.

"Melissa, child. Granny will be here soon. You dressed yet?"

That's Mom. She just looks in on me and I'm real glad she lets me dress myself. 'Cause I'm pretty special, too—if I say so myself. I got a glow; you can see it, right deep in my eyes. And when I put on my prettiest pink ribbon, my pink dress, I think I belong in a fairy book. Like everybody on my street is always squeezing my cheeks and telling me how cut I am—especially Granny.

Soon as she sees me, she gives me a big hug. "So how's my baby doing?"

Then she turns to my mom before I can answer. "You been taking good care of my child while I'm gone?"

And usually Mom just whines, Everything's okay. But today Mom sounds uptight.

"Why don't you stop acting like I don't know what I'm doing?" she says.

And Granny says, "I would if you weren't such a baby your-sad-self. You ain't even eighteen. What is this world coming to?"

It's true. Mr. Hedges says that Mom is *spoized* to be too young for mothering. But it's never bothered me the way it does Granny, who is always mumbling about it.

Still, Mom sticks up for her-proud-self: "I ain't no baby, you know."

Granny fumbles with my ribbon and grumbles some more.

"Well, if you're so smart, then why doesn't this child have her glasses yet? She'll go blind for sure . . . the longer you wait."

"No I won't," I say.

"Now hold on," says Mom. "Don't start in on that now."

"Well if I didn't have to work," says Mom, "I would've gotten her glasses a long time ago. It's not my fault you're too busy to help me out."

"Help you out! I've been offering to take this child for weeks—months. But every time I come over, you come up with some sorry excuse to put it off."

"Me? I wanted to go myself. I'm her mother. But I have to work. Anyway, how'd we get into this argument?"

"How? You're always trying to argue with me. That's how."

"Me?" says Mom. "You started it. What's the beef anyway? You're here! The child is here! We're getting the glasses today! End of story."

"End of story, my foot," says Granny as she flops into an easy chair, takes out a handkerchief, and wipes some sweat pooling under her chin. "That school is gonna send a social worker in here if Melissa doesn't get her glasses. And you know what that means? So don't get uppity. Without me, you'd be sorry. Oh boy, you'd be in big trouble."

"Right Mom, right Mom." My mom pulls my ribbon into a tight bow. "Now I'll be late for work. Then we'll see who's gonna pay for the glasses."

Then Mom brushes her hands up and down my dress, like she's dusting off a piece of furniture.

"Damn teachers and social workers," she mumbles to herself. "Now I gotta work weekends. I thought public school was free. Every time I turn around it's something else. Gym shorts, then a box of crayons, and pencils and erasers—where does it end?" my mom says, pushing me and Granny out the door.

"But I don't want glasses," I say as Granny scoops me in her arms and carries me down the stairs. I don't want everybody grumbling on a-count-a-me. "I don't want glasses."

“You mean, you don’t want glasses?” says a nice white man, who quickly straps my head into some kind of helmet, which is like being in a bowling ball, my eyes peeking out of the finger holes.

“But you’re such a pretty young lady,” says the white man as he begins putting like sunglasses on me, with all kinds of knobs and dials on it. “You must have glasses.”

“Now sit still,” he tells me as he draws up his chair, his face smack up to mine. I’ve never been so close to a white man before, and even though I’ve heard warnings about them, all their evil doings, I was surprised. He wasn’t bad at all. He had a pink glow on his face, all soft, and he even had a little halo like Mom—and his hands were all red and puffy like those angels on them church windows, stuffed in little white diapers, flying through the clouds.

He’s pretty nice, I figure. He gently pokes his finger under my eyelid and he shines a light into my face. Then the next thing I know I’m staring down a long tube, right eye first, left eye closed, and he’s saying, “Now this won’t hurt a bit . . . Relax. Just tell me what you see.”

“I see a bug,” I say, and the white man laughs. He fidgets with dome dials on my helmet. “Now what do you see?”

“It looks like, a *c-r,p?*”

“It’s an *O*,” says the white man. Then he turns more knobs. “Now what do you see?”

“Owww,” I scream and pull my eye from the tube, making a sucking noise like a plug yanked from the bathtub. “That hurt.”

I’ve never seen anything that big before, that clear. I swear it hurt. Even if it was *just* a letter, a *P* (I think), it sure wasn’t soft and fuzzy like I was used to. I swear that *P* looked ugly, like it was skinned alive, and it hurt my eye.

That’s when the white man snaps on a light and next thing I know I’m back in the waiting room—in Granny’s arms—while the white man is explaining how my glasses will be ready in a few days. Then he gives me a pat on the head and a lollipop. And he tells Granny I was an “A-plus” patient.

Over the next few days, that’s the joke up and down my building. That white man must’ve been crazy. Everybody howled with delight. Melissa, an A-plus patient. I was considered the most nervous child on the block, the one who was always turning up under people’s feet, tripping over things and bouncing off the walls, and constantly knocking things over.

“Crazy white man.” I agree with Mr. Hedges, who is sitting by the garden, whittling a piece of wood with his pocket knife.

A few days later, I'm shook out of bed by some yelling under my window. "Package for Three-B." It's the postman. And a few neighbors (especially Mr. Hedges) get real interested.

"Humm, it must be the glasses. Melissa!" he start screaming. "Get down here!"

"My glasses," I say, holding my hand out to the mailman while Mr. Hedges stands by my side. Everybody else is in their windows staring down at the courtyard.

"My, my," people whisper, "about time. Thought the mom let the child go blind for sure."

But the mailman doesn't hand over the package.

"Its COD," he says. "I need twenty-five ninety-nine."

"What's that?" I ask. But then Mom comes rushing down, digging in her purse. "How much?" But when she hears the price, she starts screaming. "That damn doctor is cheating us.."

The mailman shrugs. "Don't look at me, lady. I collect the bucks or it's return to sender."

"Return!" shouts Mr. Hedges. "What kinda mailman are you? It's a child's glasses."

"I don't care if it's the pope's potty," says the mailman. "No cash, no delivery."

"How much you need," Mr. Hedges finally says as Mom digs in her purse, pulling up a few dollars and some pennies.

"I got fifteen," says Mom.

"Well," says Mr. hedges, digging in his socks, "don't seem like eleven bucks is gonna make me rich. Take it."

He holds out the money, but Mom' proud-self refuses.

"Now come on," says Mr. Hedges. "Your daughter is nearly my child as much as yours. Ain't that right sweetheart?"

I nod.

Mr. Hedges argues some more.

"Come on now. Take the money. We can't let the child go blind. We got enough trouble around here without seeing our young ones suffering. It's only eleven bucks. And if it makes you feel better, you can pay me back.

Mom finally gives in, and the mailman says he's sorry as he hands me the package. Then I turn around and promise everybody that I'll take good care of my glasses. I promise I won't play

with them, and I'll clean them and hide them in a safe place a night. I get a lot of kisses for that, and people cheer and applaud from their windows. Then I run up to my room to try on my glasses in private.

I stare at them on the top of my bedspread. They got a sweet little red frame with little cats perched on the ends that wrap around my ears. I bought them red to match my pretty pink ribbon and my dress. But then something scary happens.

I put on them glasses. But it's a trick. This ain't my room. My curtains which had them pretty little ladybugs look all gray and torn, and instead of ladybugs all I see are dead flies and mosquitoes, squashed and dry. And my walls, which *spozed* to be all yellowy and like a rainbow, are all green and moldy and full of cracks and long strips of Scotch tape which keep all kinds of peeling paint and plaster from falling down on my head. In fact, my whole room suddenly looks like some old, dried-up toe scab!

I suddenly feel like puking and I catch myself in the mirror. I look sick and ratty. My pretty ribbon is nothing but a piece of old dishrag and my pink dress is half faded. I don't even look like a princess. Then I stick my head out of my bedroom window to make sure I'm in the right place.

I see Mr. Hedges smiling up at me. But he ain't sitting on no throne with gold dust at his feet. He's sitting on this old chair whose guts leak out like the stuff that leaks from dead animals. It's yellow sawdust, not gold. And there ain't no garden shining with diamonds. It ain't nothing but weeds and rocks and tin cans and broken glass and dog crap.

That's when Mom looks in to see what's up. Everybody is waiting to see my glasses. But I see that she looks ugly too. Like she's dead and no one told her yet. Still, I try to force a smile and tell Mom I love her and my new glasses. But in fact—as soon as she leaves the room—I feel sick again. Deep in my stomach.

I've never seen so many ugly things in my life. This can't be my room, my building, my neighbors . . . my everything. So I decided then and there: Until I figure this out, I'll never put on them glasses again.

Reference:

Rondinone, P. J. *The Digital Hood*